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ABSTRACT

In the business writing class, teachers should consider the following suggestions: (1) capture students' interest and involve them, (2) prepare them for life outside the English classroom, (3) help them better understand the writing process, and (4) show them that writing occurs in a context that includes a writer, one or more readers, and a host of other factors. In addition, it is important to provide students with firsthand writing experiences by refusing to give them purposeless textbook writing assignments and by having them write to real readers about their own real concerns. Examples of assignments fulfilling this purpose include the following: complaint letters, letters of appreciation, letters proposing a change, job application letters, resumes, annotated bibliographies on topics of general interest, instructional advice, material based on local history, guides to public buildings, and rewriting existing brochures as well as creating new ones. (EL)

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REAL READERS FOR REAL WRITERS

by

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Most student writing today is a waste of time. It involves no one but the writer and accomplishes nothing.

The most common writing assignment continues to be the essay, which is a form designed to promote reflection by its audience. However, its only audience is nearly always the teacher, and that audience reads the student essays, not in order to reflect but in order to critique and evaluate. Students seldom have an opportunity to touch someone else through written language, to affect others' ideas, attitudes, and behaviors. As a result, they come to view our classes and our assignments as exercises in futility.

In business writing classes, the most common assignment is the memo or letter, a form designed to promote action on the part of the reader or readers. In these classes, students are often asked to respond to case studies. These seem to be an improvement, but they still involve asking students to write, not as themselves, not out of a personal need to communicate, and not to accomplish a change in the behavior of a real audience. Instead, they ask students to imagine themselves in the place of some hypothetical person, in a hypothetical situation (which has been described in greater or lesser detail), writing to some hypothetical audience, for some hypothetical reason. Some students, especially those who are good at role playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons, do well on these assignments. Not surprisingly, other students don't.

Writing isn't a game. It's not an exercise in mental gymnastics. It is a critical component in the lives of most Americans. How then can we best teach writing to our students so that we--

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1. interest and involve them,
2. prepare them for life outside the English classroom,
3. help them better understand the writing process, and
4. show them that writing occurs in a context including a writer, one or more readers, and a host of other factors.

The first step is to throw out your writing textbook. Don't give students purposeless/readerless textbook writing assignments.

The second step is to recognize that the only way your students can become real writers is by writing to real readers, for real--not hypothetical--reasons.

As a teaching assistant at the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign, I once had a student named Bob who announced at the beginning of the semester that he was just not the writing type. Bob was a talker, he told me, but he just couldn't manage to do a good job of getting his ideas down on paper. His early papers substantiated that claim.

Then, halfway through the semester, I asked all students to write a letter to the editor of our local newspaper. I also urged them to submit them for publication, though I didn't require that. I left the topics for their letters completely up to the students. That was fortunate since Bob was a baseball fan and I'm not.

In the letter which he wrote (and later submitted to our local newspaper) he said how much he wished that Cubs games could be broadcast on our local radio station. He asked that townspeople who felt as he did about the matter drop him a note to that effect. He then signed his letter, giving himself the title of "President, Champaign/Urbana Citizens for Cub Baseball." I later discovered that this citizens' organization was relatively small, consisting only of Bob and his roommate, who held the title of Vice President.

When Bob's letter was published, a number of townspeople sent him cards and letters of support for the broadcast of Cubs games. Next the Cubs management contacted him and offered to fly down to Champaign to speak with him and his fellow members of the "Champaign/Urbana Citizens for Cub Baseball." I doubt they ever had that meeting, but I do know that Cubs baseball games soon began to be broadcast in our community. I also know that Bob's attitude toward writing underwent a dramatic change. He had firsthand experience with the power of the written word.

How can we ensure that all of our students have that firsthand experience? By encouraging them to write to real audiences about their own real concerns.

Assign them to write a "complaint letter" about their most recent personal experience with a shoddy product or inadequate service. Share your own complaint letters with them; describe how you wrote them and how the recipients responded; then help them to accomplish whatever goals they set for themselves in their letters: an explanation, refund, replacement, repair, or whatever. Students write about defective stereos, record clubs attempting to extort money from them, shoddy auto repairwork, sometimes even unprofessional conduct by teachers. They learn how to use writing to obtain recourse.

Next assign them to thank someone who has provided them an outstanding product or service. Again, encourage them to write out of their own experience. Some will write to auto mechanics or salespeople, others to parents, roommates and teachers. Although some will write pretend "thank you's" to imaginary audiences, many will find in the assignment an opportunity to express their sincere appreciation for the good deeds of others. They learn how to use writing to express appreciation.

Next assign them to propose a change. They should decide not only what improvement they'd like to see made, but who has the authority to make it, and how best to persuade that person. They may propose some relatively small change such as the installation of pencil sharpeners in the classrooms, or they may propose more significant changes in policies, purchases, or procedures. If they are already working, they may propose a change to their current employer. If they are not working, they may propose a change at school. Either way, they learn how to write in order to shape change for the better.

Assign them to write job application letters and resumes. Encourage them to make these something more than an academic exercise. Have them write for the job they'd like to have this coming summer or, if they are approaching graduation, that first job they would like to hold after graduation. Personnel managers are often quite willing to come into class and offer the benefit of their experience. They are also often willing to comment on students' final products. Students learn how to write in ways which improve their opportunities for employment.

Assign them to rewrite brochures and other promotional materials already being distributed by student organizations or by divisions of your institution itself. Students learn how to use their writing skills and their human relations skills in order to make existing documents more understandable and attractive.

Assign them to write annotated bibliographies on topics of personal interest to them. They will compose annotated lists of books, articles and other materials on backpacking, recipes from foreign lands, small appliance repair, and wedding etiquette. Your local library may well support your project and offer to print copies of the bibliographies for library patrons. Students learn how to use writing to make others' research more productive.

Assign your students to write brochures, booklets and other materials of value to their fellow students or to fellow residents of their community. If they decide on a sizable project, encourage them to collaborate in groups of two or three; much public writing is done that way, and students will soon discover it is a difficult way to write.

They will provide advice on how to build log cabins, respond to medical emergencies, identify wild flowers and plan lawns. Those with a lighter touch will compile humorous handbooks for incoming students or uncensored guides to campus graffitti. They may even find, as the student authors of our graffitti guide did, that they have produced a document which has brought them both newspaper publicity and the special interest of their County Historical Society.

Your local Chamber of Commerce and a number of community service groups may agree to support a student program to write materials dealing with your town, county or region. Students could then compile information on your area's cultural history ("The Polish Heritage in Stevens Point"), natural environment ("Birds of Portage County"), and services ("Pets and Vets in Point"). From such individual projects students learn how to use writing to improve others' lives.

Perhaps, as a full class project, you could ask your students to compile a guide to public buildings in your community for disabled persons. Give each student a tape measure. Next send them all out to measure curbs, ramps, and doorways; determine whether restrooms, elevators, telephones, and water fountains are accessible; and provide whatever other information might be useful to those who are visually impaired or otherwise physically disabled. From a project such as this, students learn how to use writing to meet their social responsibilities.

I have used all of these assignments with my students. Different students respond differently to them, of course, but most of them seem to appreciate having the opportunity to write to someone besides me. If, like me, you view writing as a powerful means of reaching across space and time to touch others, you owe your students a similar opportunity to become real writers with real audiences.

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